

02/25/21 Thursday

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Helicopter Crashes Near US Army Post Fort Rucker - Reports
by [Mary F.](#)

Fort Rucker is a US Army post located in Dale County, Alabama, United States. The post was named after Civil War officer Confederate General Edmund Rucker. The post is the main flight training installation for US Army Aviators and is the headquarters for the United States Army Aviation Center of Excellence.

On Thursday, a Fort Rucker helicopter has crashed at Hooper Airfield, a heliport in Dale County, Alabama, near the entrance to the Army post, according to [reports](#).

No fatalities or injuries have been reported and the pilots involved in the accident are being examined by medical personnel. Initial reports suggest that the crash was the result of an aviation mishap.

A Fort Rucker Public Affairs Director has revealed that the crash involved a training helicopter and that two people were inside the aircraft.

According to WTVY's Abby Nelson, the Apache aircraft sustained severe damage, with another person at the scene describing the helicopter as being upside down. In addition, [WTVY](#) reports that a medical helicopter took off from the scene and headed toward the Alabama city of Dothan. However, the medical helicopter's destination had not yet been officially confirmed.

Fort Rucker, which was built in 1942, is the world's largest helicopter installation. The post has served as a training base for Air force helicopter pilots since 1971, [Army Technology reports](#). Earlier Thursday, there were also reports of an incident involving a Mirage F1 fighter jet operated by the Airborne Tactical Advantage Company at the Tyndall Air Force Base in Florida. The incident took place at around 11:25 a.m. local time, [The Drive](#) reported, citing a statement from the base's public affairs office. There were no injuries or fatalities reported.

The incident is "currently under investigation," the Tyndall Air Force Base said in a statement obtained by [military.com](#).

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Ex-Girlfriend of Capitol Rioter Turns Him in to Authorities After He Texted Her During Breach
by [Mary F.](#)

Former US President Donald Trump loyalists breached the Capitol building in Washington, DC on January 6 to protest against the Electoral College's certification of Joe Biden as the winner of the 2020 presidential election.

The ex-girlfriend of a Pennsylvania man, Richard Michetti, who allegedly breached the US Capitol on January 6, turned him in to the authorities after he sent her videos and photos of him storming the building.

According to [court documents](#), Michetti texted his girlfriend while on his way to Washington, DC, on January 5 to storm the Capitol and during the riot the following day.

The ex-girlfriend, who presented authorities with evidence on January 7 and helped them identify Michetti in photographs, is not identified in the court documents.

"It's going down here we stormed the building they held us back with spray and teargas and paintballs," Michetti texted his ex-girlfriend on January 6, the court documents reveal. In one of his text messages, Michetti called his ex-girlfriend a "moron" for not believing the election was stolen.

"The vote was fraud and Trump won but they won't audit the votes. We are patriots we are not revolutionaries the other side is revolutionaries they want to destroy this country and they say it openly," another message reads.

In addition to the text messages, Michetti also sent two videos to his ex-girlfriend that show him both outside the Capitol and inside the building.

Michetti is being charged with entering a restricted building, violent entry and disorderly conduct on Capitol grounds and obstruction of Congress. If convicted, Michetti could face 20 years behind bars.

Since the Capitol riots, which left five dead, authorities have arrested more than 200 people connected to the breach. The US Department of Justice (DoJ) is currently working to bring sedition and conspiracy charges against some of the rioters who stormed the Capitol, Michael Sherwin, the acting US attorney for Washington, DC revealed in January.

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Oxford University COVID-19 Lab Reportedly Hacked by Cyber Gang
by [Mary F.](#)

Researchers have been scrambling to learn more about SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19. So far, the deadly virus has infected more than 113 million people worldwide and killed more than 2.5 million others.

A report by [The Telegraph](#) reveals that an Oxford University biology laboratory researching COVID-19 has been hacked by a cyber gang in mid-February due to fears that the lab was attempting to sell information about the virus to the highest bidder.

According to the outlet, the hack occurred at the University of Oxford's Division of Structural Biology, also known as Strubi.

The Strubi lab is unrelated to the Jenner Institute, which developed a COVID-19 vaccine with pharmaceutical giant AstraZeneca.

The hack is currently investigated by the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) as it attempts to "fully understand its impact." As of now, security sources are unclear who was responsible for

the attack and could not rule out the involvement of a hostile foreign state. The NCSC also noted that the cyber attack had “no impact on any clinical research.”

The lab studies the protein structures of COVID-19. Screenshots of the hackers’ access to the lab’s computer systems showed interfaces for what appear to be potential lab equipment used to purify and prepare biochemical samples, like proteins, The Telegraph reported.

In a statement to The Telegraph, Oxford University confirmed that Strubi had been hacked.

“We have identified and contained the problem and are now investigating further. There has been no impact on any clinical research, as this is not conducted in the affected area. As is standard with such incidents, we have notified the National Cyber Security Centre and are working with them,” an unidentified spokesperson noted. “With news about cybercriminals tampering with water purity controls, other attacks against energy companies—this type of data in the hands of cybercriminals draws many concerns,” the spokesperson also noted in a statement to [Forbes](#).

This is not the first time that hackers have been accused of targeting COVID-19 research.

In November, Microsoft accused state actors from Russia and North Korea of targeting pharmaceutical companies and researchers working on vaccines and treatments for COVID-19.

In a [blog post](#) at the time, Microsoft accused attackers of targeting “leading pharmaceutical companies and vaccine researchers” in Canada, France, India, South Korea and the United States.

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Europe on Track to Become Region With Fastest-Growing Defense Expenditures - Report by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Even as the Kremlin’s military budget continues to shrink, Western military leaders are claiming Russia poses an “existential threat” to them, justifying greater and greater expenditures on their own weapons of war.

A new report by a British think tank has warned that if present budgetary trends continue, Europe could become the world’s fastest-growing region in terms of military spending.

On Thursday, the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) think tank released its [Military Balance 2021](#) report, a broad annual measure of military trends around the globe. In the report, the academics note that defense spending by European nations, particularly those part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) alliance, have risen sharply in recent years.

“Total European defense spending grew by 2% in real terms in 2020. This was more modest than the 4.1% uplift seen in 2019, but the commitment by key players to increase their defence budgets in 2021 and beyond signals an intention to avoid the cuts that followed the 2007–08 financial crisis,” IISS noted. “If these spending plans continue on their current trajectory, in 2021 Europe could be the region with the fastest growth in global defense spending.”

The upward trajectory is mostly due to the alliance’s “2% rule,” following a 2014 pledge made in the midst of the Ukraine crisis for members to increase their defense spending to 2% of their

gross domestic product by 2024. While the agreement was made while Barack Obama was US president, it was under Donald Trump that the US began [putting serious pressure](#) on the 29 other members of the alliance to “contribute their fair share” to the collective defense.

In NATO’s [October 2020 report](#) on the previous fiscal year, the alliance noted that just 10 members have met the 2% goal, although collective defense spending by the alliance increased by 4.3% in fiscal year 2020. The discrepancy from the IISS numbers comes from the US and Canada being NATO members but not European nations, while Sweden, Serbia, and several other European nations are not part of NATO.

A chart included in the report effectively illustrates the magnitude of the [US’ defense budget](#), which at \$738 billion is nearly equal in size to the combined defense budgets of the next 15 largest national defense budgets combined. However, these numbers are just the formal military budgets; the US’ true expenditure on its armed forces includes discretionary spending bills as well as those [on nuclear weapons](#), which are managed by the Department of Energy, not Defense.

John Chapman, who heads the think tank, warned that Europe may not be able to maintain the upward trend. “The pandemic will affect global defense spending, though it will likely take until 2022-2023 for the full financial effect of government responses to start translating into defense budget cuts,” he [told Defense News](#).

Worldwide, the hikes in defense spending helped push global defense spending to a new high of \$1.83 trillion in 2020, a 3.9% increase over 2019, the report notes. In addition to Europe, spending in Asia also increased, driven upward largely by China’s swelling defense budget, which topped \$193.3 billion in 2020 - a 5.2% increase over 2019.

While Trump is out of office, NATO’s policy remains unchanged. In an [interview with Norwegian](#) national broadcaster NRK last week, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg announced a proposal that would shred the present policy of member states only paying for their own contributions to the alliance in favor of “a fairer distribution of burdens.” The change will first have to be discussed with the defense ministers of NATO members.

The 2014 pledge came about after a US-backed coup in Kiev brought right-wing nationalists to power who began to persecute the country’s substantial Russian-speaking minorities, most of whom are concentrated in the Donetsk River basin and Crimean peninsula, both of which rebelled against Kiev’s rule and the latter of which later voted in a referendum to rejoin Russia. Western powers called the reunification a “land grab” and an aggressive move against Kiev and have used it to claim alleged Russian irredentism is a danger to small nations on the Russian periphery, many of which were once until in a single state before the Soviet Union was dissolved 30 years ago.

On Thursday, the chief of US European Command, US Air Force Gen. Tod Wolters, [referred to Russia](#) as an “enduring existential threat to the United States and our European allies” and accusing Moscow of engaging in “destabilizing and malign activities across the globe” in an attempt to re-establish its Soviet-era area of influence.

The IISS report notes, however, that despite defense hikes by NATO that are directed at countering supposed rising Russian militarism, Moscow’s defense budget has declined in real terms and is set to continue falling over the next few years. In fiscal year 2021, Russia’s national defense budget has declined by 3.6% in real terms, with total Russian military expenditure set to decline from 4.1% of GDP in 2020 to under 3.8% by 2023.

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Former US Diplomat Urges 'Serious Repairs' at Home Before Biden Tries to 'Trip Up China'
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

A retired diplomat and academic has urged that the US cannot outcompete China militarily, it can only spark an arms race that will give Beijing a powerful military-industrial complex that will ultimately make both nations poorer in the end.

During an online address at a prominent American think-tank earlier this month, Chas Freeman, a veteran US diplomat and writer on international diplomacy, urged a serious rethinking of Washington's approach toward China.

"If this were a game of chess, we'd be easy to spot. We're the player with no plan beyond an aggressive opening move. That is not just not a winning strategy. It's no strategy at all,"

[Freeman told the](#) Washington Institute of Foreign Affairs.

Freeman's career includes postings as US ambassador to Saudi Arabia during the Persian Gulf war and, immediately relevant to his February 11 talk, the principal interpreter for US President Richard Nixon on his 1972 trip to China that paved the way for normalization of relations between Beijing and Washington. He is also the lifetime director of the Atlantic Council, one of the preeminent Washington foreign policy think-tanks.

"The US focus has been on tripping up China rather than improving our own international competitiveness," he continued. "Without serious repairs to restore a sound American political economy, our future is in jeopardy, and we will be in no condition to compete with the world's rising and resurgent great powers, especially China."

China accused Washington of damaging global trade with sanctions that threaten to cripple tech giant Huawei and said Tuesday it will protect Chinese companies but gave no indication of possible retaliation

Under former-US President Donald Trump, the US opened an ideological and economic broadside against China, accusing it of everything from manipulating the value of its currency to stealing Western trade secrets, putting secret "backdoors" in its tech products, illegally expanding its hold on islands in the South China Sea, and abusing human rights in Hong Kong and Xinjiang. Under US President Biden, those efforts are likely to continue and worsen, with Biden's [would-be trade representative](#) promising a "tough on China" approach that includes tariffs and his picks to head the CIA and State Department promising to ready the US for a [long-haul struggle](#).

Calling the four years of Trump's leadership "the most bizarre presidency in our history," Freeman noted that the US and China began 2021 in very different ways. China, having defeated the COVID-19 pandemic early-on and standing amid titanic changes such as lifting 850 million people out of extreme poverty in just a few decades, is enjoying high morale and confidence in its market-socialist system. "China is focused on the future," he said.

"By contrast, the United States entered this year in an unprecedented state of domestic disarray and demoralization," Freeman noted.

Just six days into 2021, the sitting president [attempted to usurp](#) the power of Congress and void an election he had lost, while lawmakers struggle through perpetual deadlock to address even the most basic issues. Meanwhile, [more than 100 times](#) the number of Americans have died of COVID-19 than have Chinese people, and the contradictory “K-shaped recovery” of a [booming stock market](#) and dramatically [expanding poverty](#) make a mockery of the term “recovery.”

“Without serious repairs to restore a sound American political economy, our future is in jeopardy, and we will be in no condition to compete with the world’s rising and resurgent great powers, especially China,” Freeman said. Paraphrasing Napoleon, he urged: “let China take its own path while we take our own. We need to fix our own problems before we try to fix China’s.” On Thursday, Chinese President Xi Jinping [declared “complete victory”](#) in eradicating extreme poverty in the country, calling the lifting of 850 million people out of destitution an “unprecedented accomplishment” among nations.

“Shaking off poverty is not the finish line but the starting point of a new life and new endeavor,” Xi said, urging Communist Party of China cadres leading the campaigns to double down on programs to keep people from falling back into poverty.

The announcement comes ahead of an anticipated announcement of another achievement: the building of China into a “moderately prosperous society,” which Xi set as a goal by 2021. The achievement is just a marker in a [much larger effort](#) to bring China up to speed with the developed world by 2049, the centennial of its socialist revolution.

While the US remains in social lockdown well into February, China’s near-total eradication of COVID-19 by the middle of 2020 has allowed its [economy to jump-start](#) by answering the needs of the US and other countries still struggling to contain it. Some economists have predicted economic growth as high as 8% for China in 2021, and that China could pass the US economy as the world’s largest by 2028.

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Twitter Testing Paid ‘Super Follows’ Feature in Bid to Double Profits by 2024
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Twitter users have often joked they “can’t believe this website is free,” but the tech giant’s model of profiting by selling data licenses and targeted advertising services doesn’t seem to be capable of delivering the robust cashflow desired by its high-powered investors.

Twitter announced Thursday it was considering two new features for which users would have to pay in an attempt to wean the social media company off its [dependency on advertising](#) revenue, but also as part of an ambitious plan to double its profits and attract new users in coming years. Twitter executives revealed to Wall Street investors at its Analyst Day event on Thursday that it was internally testing a feature called Super Follows, which would function much like Patreon in that it would give paid subscribers access to extra content from other Twitter users. That could be specially designated tweets, access to an exclusive community group, a subscription to a newsletter, or a badge indicating your support, according to [The Verge](#).

A spokesperson for [Twitter told NBC](#) the tech giant has been "examining and rethinking the incentives of our service - the behaviors that our product features encourage and discourage as people participate in conversation on Twitter."

"Exploring audience funding opportunities like Super Follows will allow creators and publishers to be directly supported by their audience and will incentivize them to continue creating content that their audience loves," they added.

The second feature being considered would be called Communities, which the Verge said seems similar to Facebook Groups, which provide for users to interact around specific interests. However, Facebook Groups have always been free, but their exclusivity and privacy has also created headaches for content moderation, a task Twitter has [increasingly thrown itself](#) into by pruning content the company judges to be "harmful." It's unclear if Twitter Communities will also require paid access.

A third feature announced Thursday is a proposed "safety mode," which would automatically detect when a user is being bombarded with negative interactions from others. The feature would give the user the option to automatically block the accounts in question, [according to CNBC](#).

Twitter gave no timeline for when these would go public - possibly later this year. However, they were announced as part of the company's ambitious plan to double its \$3.72 billion annual revenue and to increase its monetizable daily active users from 192 million to 315 million by 2024.

In fiscal year 2020, 86% of Twitter's income came from selling targeted advertising services, while 14% came from data licensing and other sources, [according to paperwork](#) filed by the company with the US Securities and Exchange Commission. Data licensing includes selling subscriptions to individuals and companies for data on its users beyond its public API.

In response to the news, however, the company's stock shot up by 7% immediately after the news, although it ended slightly down for the day.

Twitter has considered offering a number of exclusive features over the years for users willing to pay, such as an "Unsend Tweet" button, as well as considered turning some features, such as the Tweetdeck dashboard, into paid-only content. However, for now it seems the [long-coveted "Edit" button](#) will remain beyond Twitterers' grasp.

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hotos: Toyota Breaks Ground on Futuristic 'Woven City' for Japanese Employees
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Toyota has sunk half a billion dollars into Uber's self-driving car program, but that effort has proceeded at a snail's pace. However, it's Aurora's tech that will be featured in the next version of its Sienna minivan, the company announced earlier this month.

Japanese automaker Toyota has broken ground on a new futuristic planned city for thousands of its employees on the site of a former factory in the shadow of Japan's Mount Fuji. The

utopian plan includes self-driving cars, plenty of pedestrian space, and “smart” homes with built-in robotics systems.

Called the Woven City, the planned community will be located at the old vehicle yard adjacent to the former Higashi-Fuji Plant, about 62 miles north of Tokyo. Akio Toyoda, the [company president](#), said at the groundbreaking ceremony on Tuesday that the city's themes would be “human-centered, 'a living laboratory' and 'ever-evolving.'”

The name comes from streets for pedestrians and streets for self-driving cars being “woven” together into a single community. At 175 acres, or roughly a square 841 feet long and wide, the city will one day host some 2,000 Toyota employees and their families, as well as retired couples, retailers, and scientists.

The layout has been made by famed Danish architect Bjarke Ingels, who designed 2 World Trade Center in New York and the Google headquarters in both California and the UK, according to [The Japan Times](#).

The first batch of residents - 360 inventors, senior citizens, and families with young children - will move in within the next five years and begin testing the futuristic technologies that will define life in the Woven City, [according to Business Insider](#). Those include smart homes with in-home robotics systems to help residents with daily tasks, sensors that monitor residents' health, and a fleet of self-driving “e-Palette” cars that will perform both passenger and delivery functions.

The outlet noted there will be three kinds of streets: one for self-driving cars, one for personal mobility devices such as bicycles, and one strictly for foot traffic. It might seem ironic for an automobile company to be building a city of the future in which cars play only a minor role, but the city gives the company a chance to demonstrate the utility of its self-driving cars on a complex road system without [having to compete](#) with existing road traffic. It is also one in which pedestrians and drivers are less likely to be surprised by encountering the technology.

The buildings, too, will be futuristic: covered in photovoltaic cells for collecting the sun's rays that will, alongside hydrogen fuel cells, power the entire settlement. The structures will be made mostly of wood to minimize their carbon footprint, and the city will be integrated with native vegetation and hydroponic cultivation.

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Tiger Woods Has No Memory of His Severe Rollover Crash, LA Sheriff Reveals
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Golfing legend Tiger Woods suffered extensive injuries on Tuesday, after he lost control of his vehicle and wound up rolling multiple times into a nearby grassy hillside in Los Angeles, California. Officials have indicated the athlete showed no signs of impairment, and that the incident was just a bad accident.

Los Angeles County Sheriff Alex Villanueva revealed late Wednesday that Woods had no memory of the car accident that shattered his right leg and forced him to undergo emergency surgery after being pulled from the wreckage.

Villanueva [told CNN](#) that when investigators with the Lomita station of the sheriff's department arrived at the hospital to speak with the golfing champion about the incident, "he had no recollection of the crash itself."

Earlier this week, Carlos Gonzalez, a deputy with the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department (LASD), remarked during a Tuesday [news briefing](#) that when he arrived at the scene, Woods was conscious, but did not appear to be aware of the severity of his injuries.

At the same briefing, it was announced that officials had found no evidence to suggest that impairment played a role in the single-car accident.

According to [USA Today](#), Gonzalez was wearing his department-issued, body-worn camera when he interacted with Woods at the scene. The footage is expected to be released sometime in the near future. The deputy was the first official to reach Woods after a 911 call was made by a nearby resident.

Newly surfaced [reports suggest](#) that Woods was on his way to meet with American football athletes Drew Brees and Justin Herbert at the Rolling Hills Country Club to film a show for GolfTV. The [Daily Mail reported](#) the trio were scheduled to meet at 7:30 a.m. local time for an 8 a.m. taping. Woods' accident occurred at roughly 7:12 a.m.

At present, [no charges](#) are being considered against Woods, although Villanueva did state on Wednesday that it was possible a low-offense charge could be issued if it's determined the athlete was speeding or not paying attention to the flow of traffic.

Woods is currently recovering at the Harbor-UCLA Medical Center. A [statement](#) released by his team on Wednesday states he suffered "significant orthopaedic injuries" to his right leg that prompted medical staff to stabilize fractures with a rod, while also using a combination of screws and pins to remedy injuries to his ankle and foot.

Woods last underwent surgery in late December 2020 for his back. Asked on Sunday whether he would be participating in the next Masters tournament, Woods said he was unsure, but that he hoped he would be able to participate in the games.

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'Exciting Science': Parker Solar Probe Offers Shockingly Clear View of Venus
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Launched in August 2018, NASA's Parker Solar Probe is expected to revolutionize the scientific community's understanding of the Sun by collecting new data and snapping multiple photos that will offer an explanation for the central star's flow of energy and the dynamics of its source for solar winds, among other objectives.

Scientists at NASA recently revealed that the Parker Solar Probe may have made quite the unexpected discovery during a 2020 Venus flyby that gave officials a shockingly clear look at the Venusian surface.

The [Parker Solar Probe](#) was launched from Florida's Cape Canaveral with the intent of becoming the US space agency's closest eye on the Sun, as scientists seek to gain a better understanding of the inner workings of the yellow dwarf star.

However, in order for the probe to get up-close and personal with the Sun, it needs to use Venus' gravity pull to slingshot itself closer toward the star. With every pass on its seven-year journey, the probe is expected to eventually study the Sun from a distance of about 4 million miles.

With its third Venus flyby in July 2020, the probe delivered a shocking find to scientists - it managed to get a clear shot of Venus' surface, a difficult feat considering views of the planet's surface are typically obstructed by its carbon dioxide-rich clouds. The image was snapped at a distance of 7,693 miles away from the planet's nightside.

The Parker Solar Probe's Wide-field Imager (WISPR) somehow managed to snap a clear image of [Aphrodite Terra](#), a massive highland region near Venus' equator. Researchers noted in a [Wednesday release](#) that the area appears darker in the image because its temperature is much lower than surrounding areas. Officials estimate the difference is about 85 degrees Fahrenheit. "WISPR is tailored and tested for visible light observations," Angelos Vourlidas, a WISPR project scientist, said in a statement accompanying the release. "We expected to see clouds, but the camera peered right through to the surface."

It appears as though the probe's newly obtained image means one of two things - it's either more sensitive to infrared light than officials had believed, or it discovered a window that allowed its instruments to peer through the clouds and onto the Venusian surface.

"Either way," Vourlidas said, "some exciting science opportunities await us."

The WISPR team scheduled additional observations of Venus for February 20 in order to test their theory out; however, those images are not expected to be received and further processed until the end of April.

Sights of the Venusian surface weren't the only discovery that the Parker Solar Probe provided. The WISPR image also detected a so-called "nightglow" around Venus that officials explained was likely caused by oxygen and nitrogen atoms that recombine in the nightside. As for the streaks seen crossing the image, scientists are still unsure as to what they may be.

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Queen Elizabeth Urges Britons to 'Think About Other People' Before Refusing COVID-19 Vaccine

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Queen Elizabeth recently spoke on a video conference with health professionals organizing the UK's COVID-19 vaccination program in a bid to promote the state's ongoing efforts to curb the spread of the deadly disease. The UK currently ranks fifth in the world for having the highest COVID-19 case count and death toll, according to Worldometer.

Queen Elizabeth joined a group of health officials on a live-streamed conference on Thursday, and encouraged Britons to think about their fellow neighbor before outright refusing to vaccinate against the respiratory disease.

Speaking from the quarters of the Windsor Castle, the queen told the panel that individuals who refused to take the COVID-19 vaccine should “think about other people rather than themselves,” marking her very first remarks on the subject.

She later described her own experience and indicated that when she received her jab earlier in January, “it didn’t hurt at all.”

“As far as I can make out it was quite harmless. It was very quick, and I’ve had lots of letters from people who have been very surprised at how easy it was to get the vaccine,” Elizabeth added. “Once you’ve had the vaccine you have a feeling of, you know, you’re protected, which is I think very important.”

For the queen, the pandemic has strong similarities to the plague. “It’s not only here that we’ve got the virus but it’s everywhere, so it’s a strange battle that everybody’s actually fighting,” she noted.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the royal family has undertaken multiple efforts to bolster support for the government’s vaccination program. In fact, in light of the surging anti-vaccination debate and strong hesitancy over the vaccine from minority communities, the queen, Prince Charles and Prince William, among other royals, have all taken part in promoting vaccine-related campaigns.

Those campaigns include Prince Charles meeting with volunteers taking part in clinical trials for the COVID-19 vaccine, and Prince William’s recent visit to a vaccination center in Norfolk.

According to [The Telegraph](#), the UK government is planning to double its efforts by launching a new campaign targeting ethnic minority groups through various mediums that will broadcast in 14 different languages. The initiative is expected to also focus on Muslim communities ahead of Ramadan.

To date, a total of 18.6 million people have been given at least their first dose of an approved COVID-19 vaccine in the UK, according to the [latest government figures](#). Only 700,718 Britons have been fully vaccinated against the deadly respiratory illness.

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Militia Groups Seek to ‘Blow Up’ US Capitol During Biden Address, Police Chief Warns
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Acting US Capitol Police Chief Yogananda Pittman appeared for her first public hearing on Capitol Hill this week to shed light on the security failures that allowed Trump loyalists to break past barriers and ransack the grounds of the federal building. The discussions were held before a House panel overseeing the agency’s funding.

Pittman, who was not the head of the agency during the deadly Capitol riot, [told lawmakers](#) on Thursday that the Capitol Police was reviewing intelligence that suggests militia groups are intent on carrying out another violent act against the building.

The acting chief specifically noted that threats were coming from groups who were present for the January 6 riot, and that they were seeking to “blow up the Capitol” when US President Joe Biden addresses a joint session of Congress.

"We know that members of the militia groups that were present on January 6th have stated their desires that they want to blow up the Capitol and kill as many members as possible with a direct nexus to the State of the Union, which we know that date has not been identified," Pittman told lawmakers. "So based on that information, we think that it's prudent that Capitol Police maintain its enhanced and robust security posture until we address those vulnerabilities going forward." The police chief further emphasized that individuals who stormed the Capitol "weren't only interested in attacking members of Congress and officers," but also "wanted to send a symbolic message to the nation as to who was in charge of that legislative process."

Pittman's comments were made before a House Appropriations subcommittee hearing after she was asked about the need for continued security measures at the Capitol building, as well as fencing near the grounds and the ongoing deployment of the National Guard.

Initial reports indicated that National Guard troops were to may remain in Washington, DC for the duration of the second impeachment trial of former US President Donald Trump; however, recent reports suggest that forces may stay in the area [through fall](#).

Pittman did not expand on a timetable for removing the reinforced fencing or when National Guard troops would be ordered back to their home states. She noted that the agency has "no intention of keeping [troops] ... any longer than what is actually needed."

Although a date for Biden's address to a joint session of Congress has not yet been determined, it is expected to be held sometime after the congressional chambers pass his administration's COVID-19 [relief package](#).

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The Taxman Cometh - Political Cartoon

The Manhattan District Attorney's Office initially began its criminal investigation into former US President Donald Trump in August 2019, when the office issued a subpoena to Trump's accounting firm, Mazars USA, that sought eight years' worth of tax returns and related documents. Since then, a nearly two-year court battle ensued.

Trump's tax records have been officially [turned over](#) to Manhattan District Attorney Cyrus Vance Jr., days after the US Supreme Court rejected the former president's last-ditch effort to ensure the documents were shielded.

Reports suggest the much-anticipated handover of Trump's taxes and related documents amount to "[millions of pages](#)." However, it's worth noting that the files are not likely to be made public, since they are protected by grand jury secrecy rules.

The latest development was confirmed on Thursday by Danny Frost, a spokesperson for Vance's office. The agency's probe seeks to use the newfound files to dig into allegations of tax and insurance fraud, hush-money payments made to alleged mistresses of the former commander-in-chief, and falsification of business records.

Trump has long referred to Vance Jr.'s efforts as a "fishing expedition," and even the continuation of the "greatest witch hunt in history." Welp, seems this fish may be getting closer to being reeled in, folks.

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'Clown Car': Netizens Roast USPS for \$482 Million Hybrid Truck Contract Amid Delivery Delays
by [Evan Craighead](#)

US Postmaster General Louis DeJoy testified Wednesday on Capitol Hill, telling members of the House of Representatives Oversight and Reform Committee that the US Postal Service's (USPS') past year of delivery delays occurred due to "years of financial stress, underinvestment, unachievable service standards and lack of operational precision."

The USPS announced Tuesday that Wisconsin-based tactical vehicle manufacturer Oshkosh Defense was awarded a 10-year contract - with an initial investment of \$482 million - to finalize the USPS' Next Generation Delivery Vehicle (NGDV), "a purpose-built, right-hand-drive vehicle for mail and package delivery," according to the agency's [news memo](#).

"The NGDV program expands our capacity for handling more package volume and supports our carriers with cleaner and more efficient technologies, more amenities, and greater comfort and security as they deliver every day on behalf of the American people," Postmaster General DeJoy said, noting the NGDV will "reduce our impact on the environment."

While the announcement was made Tuesday, netizens took notice of the purchase while Postmaster General DeJoy was testifying in front of members of the House Oversight and Reform Committee on Wednesday.

Some even spoke of their own alleged experiences with the USPS in recent months.

Though DeJoy [told lawmakers](#) Wednesday they should "get used to" him because he plans to lead the USPS for "a long time," that may be subject to change in the near future, as US President Joe [Biden announced](#) three new nominations for the USPS Board of Governors on the same day.

If confirmed by the Senate, Amber McReynolds, Anton Hajjar and Ron Stroman would give the Democratic appointees a majority on the nine-member board, which has the ability to remove the postmaster general from their position.

US Senate Democratic Whip Dick Durbin (D-IL), one of 32 lawmakers who [last week](#) pressed DeJoy on "continued mail delays," argued that his constituents have been experiencing "hardships" due to poor leadership, not due to the "effort of postal workers."

"The Postal Service has been gutted by the previous Administration and Postmaster General DeJoy, and we must confirm these nominees swiftly and begin to undo the damage," he said in a Wednesday statement following Biden's nominations announcement.

The Democratic Whip highlighted that recent reports have "suggested DeJoy intends to implement a strategic plan that would further slow down the mail."

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Photos: Manhunt Ends as Oklahoma Cops Arrest Teens Suspected of Vandalizing Holocaust Memorial

by [Evan Craighead](#)

The Tulsa Police Department began searching for the alleged vandals Wednesday, after surveillance video from The Sherwin Miller Museum of Jewish Art showed them "bending the metal [Holocaust memorial] statues and knocking them down while also attempting to steal them unsuccessfully."

Oklahoma's Tulsa Police Department (TPD) announced Thursday that they successfully arrested two young men suspected of vandalizing the local Jewish art museum's "five Holocaust tribute statues with the names of Jewish children on them who were murdered."

"Two teens are now in custody. Special thanks to the citizens for sending in tips, and thanks to the investigators for working very quickly to make an arrest," authorities announced in a Thursday afternoon update to their initial tip-line post.

It's unclear whether the suspects are minors, as no additional information has been provided by TPD.

"They represent the children that were killed during the Holocaust, so these statues were made with a lot of time and effort gone into individual names of people ... were written on rocks and then these rocks were placed inside these statues," said TPD Lt. William White said in a Thursday [video update](#).

According to the museum, the alleged vandals caused approximately \$15,000 in damage.

"Obviously the atrocity that happened," he said, referring to the Holocaust, "and, you know, I think it's really important that we don't forget. So obviously monetary damage, but there's a certain significance there of like, 'hey, a lot of people lost their lives, we need to not let that go in vain.'"

Twitter user @palesigns claimed in a Wednesday thread that their family was responsible for donating the statues, which they said were made "to represent me and my cousins."

"[T]he statues were made of wire and had over 2,000 stones with the names of [J]ewish children who had died in the [H]olocaust," they tweeted. "These statues were extremely personal to my family and still shows antisemitism is extremely relevant today."

The TPD's vandalism arrests come amid what appears to be a growing US trend of public expression against the Jewish community.

Earlier this month, 44-year-old Washington state resident Raymond Bryant [was arrested](#) by Spokane authorities earlier this month on suspicion of malicious harassment and malicious mischief after he allegedly defaced Temple Beth Shalom synagogue with swastikas.

Local newspaper The Spokesman-Review [noted](#) that Bryant was a leader of his own neo-Nazi organization and, prior to being slapped with two felonies, described himself to reporters as a "proud Nazi" and "racist."

A [2019 report](#) from the Anti-Defamation League logged "2,107 antisemitic incidents across the US," which represented a 12% increase from the 1,879 incidents logged in 2018. The 2020 version of the same report is expected to be released in the coming months.

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Photos: Twitter Divided Over Kristen Stewart's First On-Set Look as Princess Diana
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Kristen Stewart, popular for her lead role as Bella Swan in the 'Twilight' saga, will portray Diana, Princess of Wales, in 'Spencer,' a Pablo Larraín-directed film that uses the late US-born royal's maiden name.

Fans of both Princess Diana and Stewart flocked to social media Thursday after behind-the-scenes photos gave netizens their first look at production in the biopic film.

The film is slated for release in late 2021, just shy of 2022, which would mark 25 years since the princess' fatal car crash.

Larraín, who also directed a Jackie Kennedy biopic 'Jackie,' (2016) starring Natalie Portman, told Vogue that the new film will document the Christmas holiday in which she decided to divorce Prince Charles.

"They spent Christmas there for many years and that's where we set the movie in the early '90s, around 1992, we're not specific. It's Christmas Eve, Christmas and Boxing Day... We get to understand what it is she wants and what she will do," he offered.

Due to the time setting of the movie, Diana's death will not be a focal point of the movie.

Instead, viewers will get a closer look at the late princess' relationship with sons, Prince William and Prince Harry.

"The key is how she discovers during the process of the movie that what she really needs to do is be who she wants to be," Larraín told Vogue. "And by that, it doesn't mean she needs to be next to anyone, to be part of anything, but herself and her own children. Diana was many things, but chief among them, she was a great mother."

Although more than two decades have passed since Diana's death, her fanbase remains and Twitter users of various ages appear to be impressed by Stewart's look and the film's production.

Many netizens, however, were not feeling the candid look, particularly after seeing the original promotion shot released by film production company Neon in January.

Those who disagreed with the behind-the-scenes look or the casting were not hesitant to let their opinions be known via social media.

Nevertheless, production for the film is slated to wrap in the coming months and viewers will naturally weigh in on the final product.

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US Strikes Destroy Multiple Facilities Used by Iran-Backed Militia in E. Syria - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) - US retaliatory airstrikes targeting infrastructure used by Iranian-backed militias in eastern Syria ended up destroying multiple facilities, Defense Department Press Secretary John Kirby said in a statement.

"At President [Joe] Biden's direction, US military forces earlier this evening conducted airstrikes against infrastructure utilized by Iranian-backed militant groups in eastern Syria," Kirby said on Thursday evening. "These strikes were authorized in response to recent attacks against American and Coalition personnel in Iraq, and to ongoing threats to those personnel. Specifically, the strikes destroyed multiple facilities located at a border control point used by a number of Iranian-backed militant groups, including Kait'ib Hezbollah (KH) and Kait'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada (KSS)."

Earlier, CBS News and other media reported the airstrike, with some raising questions as to why the retaliation took place in Syria and not Iraq.

The United States consulted with its Coalition partners before launching the attack, Kirby said. He also said the airstrikes send a message that Biden will take action to protect US and Coalition personnel. Kirby added that the airstrike was done in a deliberate manner that aims to de-escalate the overall situation in eastern Syria and Iraq.

On February 15, a dozen rockets hit the Erbil Air Base in Iraqi Kurdistan, killing a civilian contractor and hurting nine other people. A Shiite militant group reportedly claimed responsibility for the attack.

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US Conducts Airstrike Against Site in Syria Linked to Pro-Iran Militias - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) - The United States has carried out an airstrike against a site in Syria that is linked to pro-Iranian militias, CBS News reported.

The report said on Thursday that the United States carried out the attack in response to the recent rocket attacks in Iraq in areas where US troops and personnel are located.

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Deficit in Canada's Province of Alberta to Decline by \$1.6Bln in 2021-22 - Budget

TORONTO, February 25 (Sputnik) - The budget deficit in the Canadian province of Alberta is set to decline by \$1.59 billion to \$14.44 billion in the 2021-22 fiscal year, the provincial government said in its annual budget.

"A deficit of C\$18.2 billion [US\$14.44 billion] is targeted for 2021-22. This is C\$2 billion [US\$1.59 billion] less than the 2020-21 forecast," the province said on Thursday.

The deficit will be further reduced to \$6.35 billion by 2023-24, the province estimates. Alberta's government attributes this to declining costs as the province comes to grips with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

The province said the real GDP fell by an estimated 7.8 percent in 2020 but anticipates growth of 4.8 percent in 2021 and expects the economy to recover to pre-pandemic levels by 2022, one year earlier than expected.

The provincial government said it will invest over \$15.87 billion in new construction projects, estimate to create up to 90,000 jobs and \$18.25 billion in healthcare, a \$714 million increase over 2020, to shore up areas impacted and strained by the pandemic.

The budget comes amid the Alberta's worst economic downturn in decades, with the pandemic exacerbating the lingering effects of the 2014 oil price crash.

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Canadian Government 'Concerned' by Sexual Assaults During Hotel Quarantine - Ministers

TORONTO, February 25 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government is concerned by the multiple sexual assaults involving travelers during COVID-19 quarantine enforcement, but will continue with the programs, cabinet ministers told the House of Commons.

To date, two women have been assaulted after being subject to government quarantine measures. A woman identified as "Sarah" was assaulted in her state-designated hotel room near the Montreal-Trudeau International Airport, while another was assaulted at her home by a state-trained security guard during a quarantine enforcement check.

"I am deeply concerned by the reports of violence and sexual assault," Chrystia Freeland said during Thursday's Question Period session.

Canada's Conservative Party, led by Shadow Minister for Health Michelle Rempel Garner, has called on the Trudeau government to suspend the hotel quarantine program and introduce an at-home quarantine verification system by properly trained and vetted security agents.

Canada's Health Minister Patty Hajdu rejected the calls for the revision of entry programs, arguing that they are designed to "keep Canadians safe." Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his cabinet members have boasted that Canada's entry requirements are among the strictest in the world.

Canada's new enhanced entry requirements, including the out-of-pocket hotel quarantine for incoming air passengers, came into effect on February 22.

Measures, including the hotel quarantine requirement, have been met with backlash, with some likening them to internment camps. The Canadian Constitution Foundation (CCF) has said that the hotel quarantine plan violates citizens' rights to mobility and has indicated a willingness to challenge the measures in court.

Although the Canadian government is constitutionally prohibited from barring citizens from leaving the country, the Trudeau government has used the enhanced border security measures to discourage international travel amid the pandemic.

All entrants into Canada must complete a mandatory 14-day quarantine. As of March 25, 2020, Quarantine Act violators may be subject to a fine of up to \$537,000 and/or imprisonment for six months.

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Biden, King Salman Discuss Ending Yemen War, Saudi Arabia's Defense - White House

WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and Saudi Arabia King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud discussed over the telephone ending the conflict in Yemen and the United States' commitment to back Riyadh in defending its territory, the White House said in a statement.

"President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. spoke today with King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud of Saudi Arabia to address the longstanding partnership between the United States and Saudi Arabia," the statement said on Thursday. "Together they discussed regional security, including the renewed diplomatic efforts led by the United Nations and the United States to end the war in Yemen, and the US commitment to help Saudi Arabia defend its territory as it faces attacks from Iranian-aligned groups."

Biden assured King Salman he would work to make the relationship between both countries "as strong and transparent as possible," the statement said.

The US president also welcomed the recent release of Saudi-American activists and human rights defender Loujain al-Hathloul, the statement added.

Biden announced earlier that the war in Yemen must end, retracted US support for any offensive military operations in the country and revoked the previous Trump administration decision to blacklist the Houthi opposition movement as a global terrorist group.

The US Department of State said later Washington will seek ways to improve its support for Saudi Arabian efforts to defend itself.

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UNSC Extends Yemen Financial, Travel Ban, Sanctions Criminal Investigations Chief Zabin

UNITED NATIONS, February 25 (Sputnik) - UN Security Council adopted a resolution renewing for another year imposed in 2014 financial and travel ban sanctions on destabilizing actors in Yemen, including head of the Criminal Investigation Department Sultan Zabin.

The resolution, adopted on Thursday, "decides to renew until February 28, 2022, the measures imposed in paragraphs 11 and 15 of resolution 2140 [freezing funds of and imposing a travel ban on individuals designated by the Yemen Panel of Experts]."

The document also subjects Sultan Zabin to the measures for engaging in acts that "threaten peace, security and stability of Yemen, including violations of applicable humanitarian law and human rights abuses in Yemen."

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US to Distribute J&J COVID-19 Vaccine As Quickly As Produced - Biden

WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is prepared to roll out the Johnson & Johnson coronavirus vaccine as quickly as it is manufactured after the company obtains the necessary approval, President Joe Biden said.

"If the FDA [The US Food and Drug Administration] approves the use of this new vaccine, we have a plan to roll out as quickly as Johnson & Johnson can make the vaccine," Biden told a meeting of the National Governors Association on Thursday.

Johnson & Johnson is expected to become the third pharmaceutical company to have a vaccine against the novel coronavirus approved in the United States after Pfizer and Moderna. The vaccine boasts a 85 percent efficacy against severe disease cases and is administered in a single shot, unlike the two-dose competitors.

Biden said that the vaccination campaign is weeks ahead of schedule with 50 million inoculations done by Thursday. The US president said that the United States administers more daily shots than any country in the world and is on track to get enough vaccines for every American by the end of July.

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Regional US Commission Bans High-Volume Fracking in Delaware River Basin

WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) - A new rule will prohibit high pressure hydraulic fracturing , or fracking, for oil and gas in shale deposits beneath a watershed bordering four US states, the Delaware River Basin Commission (DRBC) announced.

Commissioners representing the states of New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Delaware voted to approve the ban while the commissioner representing the federal government abstained.

"High-volume hydraulic fracturing and related activities pose significant, immediate and long-term risks to the development, conservation, utilization, management, and preservation of the water resources of the Delaware River Basin and to Special Protection Waters of the Basin, considered by the Commission to have exceptionally high scenic, recreational, ecological, and/or water supply values," the commission said in its ruling on Thursday.

The commission also said it may draft rules to ban the import and export of water and other fluids used in fracking, a process that injects water and chemicals into oil and gas wells at high pressure to break up rock formations blocking access to wells.

The expansion of fracking throughout much of the nation has helped the United States become a net exporter of both oil and natural gas.

While industry officials claim the process is safe if done correctly, the commission said that scientific literature, studies and reports during the past decade have demonstrated that "high volume hydraulic fracturing and related activities have adversely impacted surface water and groundwater resources, including sources of drinking water, and have harmed aquatic life in some regions."

The commission said new regulations for exports and imports of water and wastewater used to frack will be drafted in the future, if needed.

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US Militias Threaten to Attack Biden's State of Union Address at Capitol - Police Chief

WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) - Acting US Capitol Police Chief Yogananda Pittman said they have intelligence suggesting US militia groups are threatening to attack the US Capitol during President Joe Biden's upcoming State of the Union address.

"We know that members of the militia groups that were present on January 6 have stated their desires that they want to blow up the Capitol and kill as many members as possible with a direct nexus to the State of the Union," Pittman said on Thursday during a congressional hearing.

As a result of the threat, Capitol police will maintain its enhanced and robust security posture.

Moreover, Pittman said 35 Capitol police officers are under investigation and six others have been suspended due to allegations of misconduct during the January 6 incident when a group of former President Donald Trump's supporters entered the Capitol to protest lawmakers accepting electoral slates from several states Trump claims were invalid and robbed him of election victory.

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Texas Cold Snap Cuts State's Natural Gas Production Nearly in Half - US Energy Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) - Natural gas output in the state of Texas hit a daily low on February 17 following a week-long blast of Arctic cold, with production about 45 percent below levels a week earlier, the Energy Information Administration (EIA) said.

"Natural gas production in Texas fell almost 45 percent from 21.3 Bcf/d [billion cubic feet per day] during the week ending February 13 to a daily low of 11.8 Bcf/d on Wednesday [February 17]," EIA said Thursday in a report based on data from the consulting firm IHS Markit.

The decline in natural gas production was mostly a result of freeze-offs, which occur when water and other liquids in the raw natural gas stream freeze at the wellhead or in gas gathering pipelines near production activities.

Unlike the relatively winterized natural gas production infrastructure in northern areas of the country, natural gas infrastructure, such as wellheads, gathering lines, and processing facilities in Texas are more susceptible to the effects of extremely cold weather, the report added.

After reaching a daily low on February 17, natural gas production in Texas began increasing as temperatures started to rise. Daily production reached an estimated 20.9 Bcf/d on February 24, only about 0.3 Bcf/d lower than the average in the week ending February 13, according to the report.

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New US Envoy to UN Says Aims to Cooperate With Allies to Address Conflicts, Human Rights

UNITED NATIONS, February 25 (Sputnik) - New US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield said she will seek to cooperate with partners at world body in tackling conflicts worldwide, elevating human rights and reforming the organization.

Earlier on Thursday, Thomas-Greenfield presented her credentials to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, officially assuming the role of the US envoy.

"I just had the honor of formally presenting my credentials to the UN Secretary General as the representative of the United States of America to the United Nations, and I'm thrilled to be here," Thomas-Greenfield told reporters.

The ambassador noted that the United States is clear eyed about the difficult work that needs to be done from elevating human rights to reforming the United Nations itself to addressing conflicts old and new around the world.

"We look forward to engaging our allies and our partners to get it done," she said.

Thomas-Greenfield also said as the United States' representative, she takes seriously the role of the United Nations as the world's "most important forum" to bring countries and people together.

"Multilateralism is back, and diplomacy is back, and America is back, and we're ready to get to work," she added.

On Monday, Thomas-Greenfield will also assume the role of the UN Security Council President during the month of March.

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Biden, King Salman Discuss Ending Yemen War, Saudi Arabia's Defense - White House

WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and Saudi Arabia's King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud in a phone conversation discussed ending the conflict in Yemen and Washington's commitment to back Riyadh in defending its territory, the White House said in a statement.

"President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. spoke today with King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud of Saudi Arabia to address the longstanding partnership between the United States and Saudi Arabia," the statement said on Thursday. "Together they discussed regional security, including the renewed diplomatic efforts led by the United Nations and the United States to end the war in Yemen, and the U.S. commitment to help Saudi Arabia defend its territory as it faces attacks from Iranian-aligned groups."

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Russia, Sierra Leone Sign Joint Statement on No First Placement of Weapons in Outer Space
UNITED NATIONS, February 25 (Sputnik) - Russia and Sierra Leone signed a joint statement on No First Placement of Weapons in Outer Space, the Permanent Mission of Russia to the United Nations said in a statement.

"Today, Russia and Sierra Leone signed a joint statement on No First Placement of Weapons in Outer Space," the statement said on Thursday.

The signing ceremony was held in the Permanent Mission of Russia to the United Nation in New York and the document was signed by Russian Ambassador to the world body Vassily Nebenzia and head of the Sierra Leone diplomatic mission Alie Kabba.

"Joint statements on non placement of weapons in outer space represent the only means to ensure transparency and trust in this sphere," the mission said.

The signing of the statement contributes to ensuring equal and indivisible security for all as well as to enhancing the predictability and sustainability of countries' activities in the peaceful exploration and use of outer space, the mission added.

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Ex-US Olympic Coach Commits Suicide After Being Charged With Sexual Assault, Abuse

WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) - Former US Olympic gymnast coach John Geddert has killed himself hours after prosecutors in the state of Michigan filed 24 charges against him for allegedly sexually and physically abusing his former female gymnasts, Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel said in a statement.

"My office has been notified that the body of John Geddert was found late this afternoon after taking his own life," Nessel said in the statement on Thursday. "This is a tragic end to a tragic story for everyone involved."

The 63-year-old Geddert was charged with 14 counts of human trafficking, forced labor causing injury; six counts of human trafficking of a minor for forced labor; one count of continuing criminal enterprise, one count of first-degree criminal sexual conduct; one count of second-degree criminal sexual conduct; and one count of lying to a peace officer during a violent crime investigation.

Geddert would have faced a sentence of life in prison if convicted.

Geddert was associated with US gymnastics team's former doctor Larry Nassar, who was sentenced to 60 years in prison in 2017 for possessing child pornography. Nassar was also given another 40 to 175 years in prison for sexually abusing young female athletes. More than 260 women and girls have claimed they were assaulted by Nassar.

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US 'Weeks Ahead' of Schedule in Administering Vaccines - Biden

WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Thursday that his administration is "weeks ahead of schedule" in administering half of the planned 100 million vaccine doses in the first 100 days in office.

"Today, I am here to report, we are half way there... in just 37 days since I become President. That is weeks ahead of schedule," Biden said at an event commemorating 50 million administered vaccine shots.

The United States will be the first country that will provide 100 million shots, he added.

US President has reassured that there are no plans to vaccinate every American. He also urged people to continue maintaining protective measures, such as wearing masks, washing hands and keeping social distance.

Biden warned that the number of hospitalizations could increase again as new variants of the novel coronavirus disease emerge.

"This is not the time to relax," he said.

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US Stocks Plunge in Worst Day for Nasdaq in 4 Months

NEW YORK, February 25 (Sputnik) - Stocks on Wall Street plunged on Thursday, with technology index Nasdaq losing more than 3 percent for its biggest one-day decline since the end of October, as bond yields surged and players took profit on four straight months of gains. Nasdaq, which includes stocks of tech giants such as Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google, closed down 3.5 percent at 13,119. The index hit a record high of 14,175 last week. Nasdaq fell came as the yield on US bonds' benchmark ten-year note surged above the 1.5 percent, a development not seen since February 2020, before the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. Bond yields spiked as weekly US jobless claims fell to November lows. The better employment scenario raised expectations that the economy may rebound faster than thought from the COVID-19 pandemic, triggering investor rotation out of pricey stocks into undervalued companies that could benefit from a broader recovery.

Nasdaq was the favorite target of sellers as it had run way ahead of the Dow Jones Industrial Average and the S&P 500. In Thursday's session, stocks on the Dow and S&P500 appeared relatively more valuable than those on Nasdaq which exhibited grossly-inflated price-earnings ratios.

The Dow, the broadest gauge of the New York Stock Exchange, fell 1.8 percent to 31,402. The S&P 500, a barometer for the top 500 US stocks, closed down 2.5 percent at 3,829.

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Boeing to Pay \$6.6Mln to US for Compliance Failures - Federal Aviation Administration

WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) - The Boeing Company must pay the US government more than \$6.6 million for failing to meet performance obligations and in two previous enforcement cases, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) announced in a press release. "The FAA has assessed \$5.4 million in deferred civil penalties against The Boeing Company for failing to meet its performance obligations under a 2015 settlement agreement," the release said on Thursday. "The Chicago-based aircraft manufacturer also agreed to pay \$1.21 million to settle two pending FAA enforcement cases."

Under the 2015 agreement, Boeing pledged to change its internal processes to improve and prioritize regulatory compliance, the release said.

"The agreement required the company to meet specific performance targets, and authorized the FAA to assess deferred penalties if it failed to do so," the release added.

The FAA assessed \$5.4 million in deferred penalties under the terms of the 2015 agreement because Boeing missed some of its improvement targets, and because some company managers did not sufficiently prioritize compliance with FAA regulations, according to the release.

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Canada's Defense Chief Vows Investigation After Top Officer Resigns Over 'Misconduct'

TORONTO, February 25 (Sputnik) - All allegations of misconduct in the Canadian military will be investigated meticulously and independently of the chain of command after the country's top officer temporarily stepped down amid an investigation into allegations of sexual misconduct, Minister of National Defense Harjit Sajjan said.

On Wednesday evening, Saajan said the Chief of Defense Staff Adm. Art McDonald would be temporarily stepping down while the Canadian Forces National Investigation Service (CFNIS) investigates claims of misconduct against him. The allegation reportedly dates back to McDonald's interaction with female junior officer during an annual Arctic training exercise in 2010, according to media reports.

"I can assure [the Member of Parliament] every single every allegation will be investigated thoroughly, independent from the chain of command and regardless of position and regardless of rank," Sajjan said during Question Period.

It is unclear when Sajjan became aware of the allegations or when the investigation was launched and the Department of National Defense (DND) did not respond for comment. The Privy Council Office, the central agency of Canada's top bureaucrats who advise the Prime Minister, said they are working to confirm the details about the timeline of events and coordination with the DND and the Prime Minister. The office of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau referred Sputnik to Sajjan's earlier statement.

The news deals another serious blow the Canadian Armed Forces' reputation after Global News reported that former Chief of Defense Staff Gen. Jonathan Vance is being accused of misconduct by two female subordinates, including during his time as the country's commanding officer.

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Blinken Discusses With Saudi Counterpart Riyadh's Human Rights Record - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken discussed with his Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud over the telephone Riyadh's human rights record, State Department's spokesman Ned Price said.

Their phone call came ahead of planned talks between US President Joe Biden and King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, which is expected to precede the release in the United States of a previously classified intelligence report on the murder Saudi-American dissident columnist Jamal Khashoggi.

"Secretary Blinken and the Foreign Minister discussed the importance of Saudi progress on human rights, including through legal and judicial reforms, and our joint efforts to bolster Saudi defenses," Price said in a statement on Thursday.

Blinken also reiterated his commitment to US-Saudi cooperation on ending the war in Yemen, regional security coordination, counterterrorism, and economic development, Price added. The intelligence report is expected to shed more light on alleged role of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and may cause tensions between the US and Saudi Arabia. Khashoggi went missing in 2018 after entering the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. The Saudi government initially denied any knowledge of Khashoggi's whereabouts, but eventually admitted that he was killed and dismembered inside the diplomatic mission. The Saudi government sentenced several people over their role in Khashoggi's murder and has repeatedly denied allegations that members of the royal family were involved in the incident.

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US Warns Expulsion of EU Envoy From Venezuela Will Further Isolate Maduro Government

WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) - The expulsion of EU diplomatic mission head from Venezuela will isolate even more President Nicolas Maduro's government, State Department spokesperson Ned Price told reporters.

On Wednesday, Venezuelan Foreign Minister Jorge Arreaza announced that the EU envoy in Venezuela was declared 'persona non grata' and would have 72 hours to leave the country. "By expelling then EU Ambassador to Venezuela Isabel Brilhante Pedrosa, the Maduro regime has removed one of the international champions standing up for democracy in Venezuela and human rights of the Venezuelan people," Price said on Thursday. "This action will only further isolate the Maduro regime."

The decision was made in response to a new bout of sanctions that the EU foreign ministers imposed on Monday on another 18 Venezuelan officials over human rights violations and accounts of "undermining democracy." The total number of Venezuelan nationals under EU sanctions has reached 55 people.

Maduro stressed later on Wednesday that Venezuela will not engage in any dialogue or deals with the EU until sanctions are lifted.

The EU sanctions followed the parliamentary elections held in Venezuela in December. According to the National Electoral Council of Venezuela, the elections were won by the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela led by Maduro, which secured him a total of 219 seats (nearly 63 percent of all seats). The opposition boycotted the elections. The EU did not recognize the results of the elections, calling the voting process undemocratic and a "missed opportunity for freedom."

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY
WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) -

EU SUMMIT

- * The heads of state and government of the European Union, following the summit via video conference on Thursday, agreed to speed up the authorization, production and distribution of vaccines against the coronavirus, the summit's final statement says.
- * The EU leaders agreed on the need to introduce electronic vaccination certificates that will be ready within three months, German Chancellor Angela Merkel said.

UNREST IN ARMENIA

- * Armenian opposition leader Vazgen Manukyan on Thursday urged barricading the streets next to parliament amid the standoff between the government and the general staff of the armed forces.
- * Russian President Vladimir Putin and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan discussed the situation in Armenia by phone, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.
- * Pashinyan wrapped up his rally and urged all political forces to start consultations, a Sputnik correspondent reported.
- * Pashinyan said attempts to stage a coup in Armenia would not succeed.

IMF ASSESSES CRYPTOCURRENCY RISKS, BENEFITS

- * The International Monetary Fund (IMF) is actively working with other multinational organizations to assess the potential benefits and risks from digital currencies, IMF spokesperson Gerry Rice told reporters on Thursday.

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

- * Victor Medvedchuk, the leader of Ukraine's biggest opposition alliance, has accused the United States of running the eastern European country as if it was a colony.
- * Ukrainian law enforcement officers are conducting searches and detentions in the office of the Opposition Platform - For Life party, arrests are underway, the Strana.ua publication reported.

EXPLOSION IN SINGAPORE

- * A powerful explosion in Singapore's western Tuas area has left three people dead and five others in critical condition, Singaporean Minister of State for Defense and Manpower Zaqq Mohamad said on Thursday.

CORONAVIRUS MEASURES

- * UNICEF and the British-Swedish AstraZeneca pharmaceutical corporation have signed an agreement to provide coronavirus vaccines to 85 nations, the agency announced in a press release.
- * Europe may lift social distancing regulations by the beginning of the next year although the coronavirus will still likely be spreading, World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Director for Europe Hans Henri Kluge.
- * The first shipment of Russia's Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine arrived in Montenegro on Thursday, the government in Podgorica said.

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US State Dept. Renews Call for Russia to Release Navalny Amid Transfer to Prison

*WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) - The US State Department on Thursday renewed its call for Russia to free opposition figure Alexey Navalny, who was earlier transported from a preliminary detention facility in Moscow.

Navalny's lawyer, Vadim Kobzev, told Sputnik that, although he was not informed as to where his client was being sent, he expected it to be a prison.

"We renew our calls for Russia to release those detained for exercising nothing more than human rights. In many cases nothing more than what they are guaranteed under Russia's own constitution, and that includes Mr. Navalny" State Department spokesman Ned Price told reporters.

On February 2, a court in Moscow ruled to replace Navalny's suspended sentence in the Yves Rocher fraud case with three and a half years in prison. This was done upon the request from the penitentiary facility, which argued that Navalny had repeatedly broken the rules of the suspended sentences and a search warrant had to be issued shortly before his detention.

The Yves Rocher case was launched upon the request of the French company's then-representative in Russia. The court determined that Alexey Navalny and his brother Oleg used false information to convince the cosmetics company to sign a deal for transportation of mail with their company. The services were overpriced and eventually provided by another transport company. The damage was estimated at 30 million rubles (\$405,300).

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US Senators Move to Rescue Market Watchdog's Whistleblower Program

WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) - Legislation to shore up a depleted fund to pay whistleblower rewards to commodity traders who report wrongdoing was introduced in the US Senate by lawmakers from both parties, Senator Chuck Grassley said on Thursday.

"The CFTC [Commodity Futures Trading Commission] whistleblower program has become far more successful than Congress imagined when we set it up back in 2010. The risk of a cash shortage is so great, the commission recently told my office it's temporarily paused review of some cases that could wipe out the Customer Protection Fund used to pay whistleblowers," Grassley said in a press release.

The legislation is sponsored by Republican Senators Grassley and Joni Ernst and Democrat Senators Maggie Hassan and Tammy Baldwin, the release said.

The CFTC operates a Customer Protection Fund, established by Congress in 2010, to hold funds that are used to reward whistleblowers for their disclosures. Under current law, the Customer Protection Fund is capped at \$100 million, and any fines collected after the account reaches the cap are remitted to the Treasury's general fund, the release added.

In recent years, the increasing size and quantity of fines stemming from successful whistleblower disclosures have led to larger reward disbursements, which risk depleting the fund before it can be replenished, according to the release.

The legislation addresses the shortfall by raising the Consumer Protection Fund limit to \$150 million, the release said.

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US Watching Armenia Situation Closely, Urges Parties to Exercise Restraint - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) - The United States is watching the situation in Armenia very closely and is calling on all sides to exercise restraint, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

"We are of course aware of recent developments in Armenia. We are following the situation very closely," Price said at a briefing. "We urge all parties to exercise restraint and to avoid any escalatory or violent actions. We remind all parties of the bedrock democratic principle that [a] state's armed forces should not intervene in domestic politics."

Washington also urges leaders to resolve differences peacefully while respecting the rule of law, Price added.

Supporters and opponents of Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan staged new demonstrations in Yerevan earlier in the day. This followed a series of high-profile military layoffs, including of army chief of staff Onik Gasparyan and deputy chief Tigran Khachatryan, who mocked the prime minister's controversial comment about the alleged failure of Russian-supplied Iskander missiles during the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh.

The military demanded that Pashinyan step down, which the prime minister slammed as an attempted coup.

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US, Dutch Top Diplomats Agree to 'Manage' Challenges Posed by Russia, China - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Dutch Foreign Minister Stef Blok in a call on Thursday agreed to manage the global challenges posed by Russia, China and Iran, Department of State Spokesperson Ned Price said in a readout.

"Secretary Blinken and Foreign Minister Blok agreed to intensify US-Netherlands cooperation on the basis of shared values to manage key global challenges, including those posed by China, Russia, and Iran," Price said.

Blinken expressed the United States' desire to revitalize and strengthen the US-Netherlands relationship, the readout noted. Blinken and Blok "emphasized the importance of bilateral cooperation in ensuring Transatlantic unity and security," Price said.

Blinken also thanked the Netherlands for hosting the Climate Adaptation Summit and expressed the United States' commitment to combating climate change, the readout added.

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US, Kuwait Discuss Regional Security, Gulf Unity - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Kuwaiti Foreign Minister Sheikh Ahmad Nasser al-Mohammad al-Sabah addressed regional security and spoke about Gulf unity during a phone conversation on Thursday, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a readout.

"The Secretary and the Foreign Minister discussed regional security and Gulf unity, and Secretary Blinken welcomed Kuwait's mediating role in the region," Price said.

Price added that Blinken also expressed to al-Sabah and the people of Kuwait the best wishes on "the 30th anniversary of Kuwait's liberation from Saddam Hussein's invasion and occupation, as well as on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of Kuwait's independence."

Kuwait, along with the US, has spearheaded efforts to settle the conflict that has been ongoing since June 2017, when four nations — Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt and the UAE - cut ties with Qatar, accusing the state of backing terrorism, while others later downgraded ties with Doha and imposed a total blockade of the country.

Doha has rejected all accusations of backing terrorism, saying that the actions directed against the country are motivated by envy of its economic success and a desire to limit its sovereignty.

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US Watching Armenia Situation Closely, Urges Parties to Exercise Restraint - State Dept

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"We are of course aware of recent developments in Armenia. We are following the situation very closely," Price said at a briefing. "We urge all parties to exercise restraint and to avoid any escalatory or violent actions. We remind all parties of the bedrock democratic principle that [a] state's armed forces should not intervene in domestic politics."

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Ex-US Olympic Coach Faces Charges of Sexual Assault, Abuse - Michigan Attorney General

WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) - Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel's office said on Thursday that it has filed 24 charges against former US Olympic coach John Geddert for allegedly sexually and physically abusing his former female gymnasts.

"Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel's office has filed 24 criminal charges against John Geddert, former US Olympics gymnastics coach and former owner of Lansing-area Twistars USA Gymnastics Club, accusing him of committing at least one sexual assault and multiple incidents of physical abuse against dozens of his young female athletes," the governor's office said in a press release.

The 63-year-old Geddert is charged with 14 counts of human trafficking, forced labor causing injury; six counts of human trafficking of a minor for forced labor; one count of continuing criminal enterprise, one count of first-degree criminal sexual conduct; one count of second-degree criminal sexual conduct; and one count of lying to a peace officer during a violent crime investigation.

If convicted, Geddert will face a sentence of life in prison, the release said.

Geddert was associated with US gymnastics team's former doctor Larry Nassar, who was sentenced to 60 years in prison in 2017 for possessing child pornography. Nassar was also given another 40 to 175 years in prison for sexually abusing young female athletes. More than 260 women and girls have claimed they were assaulted by Nassar.

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US Sees Indications of Radicalization of Kids in Detention Centers in Syria - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) - The United States has seen indications of radicalization in children in detention centers in Syria, the US State Department's Acting Counterterrorism Coordinator John Godfrey said at a Middle East Institute conference on Thursday.

"We've seen indications of radicalization in kids as young as 10 and 11 years of age," said Godfrey, who is also the US special envoy to the coalition against the Islamic State (a terrorist group outlawed in Russia).

Godfrey said there are about 2,000 foreign terrorist fighters currently in the custody of the Syrian Democratic Forces and some 10,000 associated family members mostly in IDP camps. He underscored that in that 10,000 there a large number of children who have been through some horrific experiences.

US Central Command (CENTCOM) chief Kenneth McKenzie said earlier in February that the SDF holds the fighters in more than two dozen detention centers across northeast Syria.

The SDF, founded in 2015 of Kurdish and Arab militias and operating in the north of Syria, has played an active role in fighting the Islamic State. The SDF has placed thousands of the captured militants and members of their families in prisons and camps.

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US Must Treat China as Rival, Trade Partner - Trade Representative Nominee

WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) - The United States needs to think of China as a rival, trade partner and outsized player while at the same time cooperating with Beijing to address global challenges, President Joe Biden's nominee for US Trade Representative Katherine Tai said during her Senate confirmation hearing on Thursday.

"With China, we must remember how to walk, chew gum and play chess at the same time," Tai said. "China is simultaneously a rival, a trade partner, and an outsized player whose cooperation we'll also need to address certain global challenges."

Tai, who spent the past four years as chief counsel for Democrats on the US House Ways and Means Committee responsible for trade, promised to act sensibly and tough on China. She agreed in principle that Beijing needed to keep promises it made to the previous Trump administration on the US-China trade deal concluded in January 2020.

But Tai also refrained from giving details on how she planned to proceed on the thorny issue of bilateral tariffs, export bans and other key issues, saying she will rely on the "opportunities and limitations in our existing toolbox".

"I know first-hand how critically important it is that we have a strategic and coherent plan for holding China accountable to its promises and effectively competing with its model of state-directed economics," Tai said.

Since taking office on January 20, Biden has not committed to entirely doing away with the host of tariffs on Chinese goods placed by his predecessor. But he did speak on a two-hour telephone call with Chinese President Xi Jinping earlier this month.

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Ex-US Air Force Contractor Admits Theft of 2,500 Classified Pages - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) - Former US Air Force contractor Isaak Kemp pleaded guilty to illegally removing 2,500 pages of classified material and stashing the documents in his home, the Justice Department said on Thursday.

"Law enforcement discovered the more than 100 documents, which contained approximately 2,500 pages of material classified at the SECRET level, while executing a search warrant at Kemp's home," the department said in a statement. "Despite having training on various occasions on how to safeguard classified material, Kemp took 112 classified documents and retained them at his home."

Kemp pleaded guilty to charges stemming from the theft at US District Court in the state of Ohio on Thursday, the release said.

According to court documents, Kemp was employed as a contractor at the Air Force Research Laboratory (AFRL) from July 2016 to May 2019, and later as a contractor at the US Air Force National Air and Space Intelligence Center (NASIC). While working at AFRL and NASIC – both located on Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Fairborn – Kemp had Top Secret security clearance.

Unauthorized removal or retention of classified documents is a federal crime punishable by up to five years in prison, Justice said.

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Biden Trade Chief Nominee Sees Tariffs as 'Important Tools' - Testimony

WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) - Tariffs are important tools to protect US trade interests though a strategy rethink is also needed to ensure just returns for the world's leading economy and its trading partners, President Biden's Trade Representative nominee Katherine Tai said on Thursday.

"Tariffs are a very important part of our fair trade remedies toolbox," Tai told a Senate hearing held to confirm her nomination.

But the United States also needs to rethink strategic trade policies, Tai said.

Biden since taking office has not dramatically changed Trump administration trade policies. In fact, earlier this week Yahoo news reported that he is likely to leave the tariffs on China in place. "Trade policies in past decades have pitted one segment of US workers against another. We must better coordinate and break out of that pattern," she said.

Tai, who spent the past four years as the chief counsel for Biden's Democratic party on the U.S. House Ways & Means Committee responsible for trade, promised at Thursday's Senate hearing to act sensibly and tough on China at the same time.

In one of the first signs on how she would proceed, Tai signaled support for maintaining Trump administration tariffs on imported steel and aluminum.

"We have to acknowledge that we have... a very significant global marketplace problem in the steel and aluminum markets that are driven primarily by China's overcapacity," Tai said. "But it's not, it's not just a China problem."

But to reflect the strategic rethink and balance she spoke about, she agreed in principle Beijing needed to keep promises it made to the Trump administration on the US-China phase one trade deal concluded in January 2020.

She also emphasized the need for the Biden administration to keep working on the US-Mexico-Canada Agreement signed under its predecessor and have a better working relationship with the World Trade Organization - which had been another favorite Trump target aside from China.

Washington needs to have "hard conversations in Geneva in a constructive way", she added, referring to the WTO.

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UN Chief Encouraged by India, Pakistan Agreeing to Cease-Fire in Kashmir - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, February 25 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres welcomed the agreement reached between India and Pakistan to adhere to a ceasefire along the Line of Control in the Kashmir region, his spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Thursday.

"The Secretary-General is encouraged by the joint statement issued by the militaries of India and Pakistan on their agreement to observing the ceasefire at the Line of Control in Kashmir and engaging through established mechanisms," Dujarric said in a press briefing.

The spokesman also said Guterres hoped the step will provide an opportunity for further dialogue between the two nations.

India and Pakistan have long been at odds over and fought three wars regarding Kashmir. Occasional clashes on the contact line have been a regular occurrence, but tensions escalated in August 2019, when the Indian government annulled the special autonomous status of its Jammu and Kashmir state and divided the region into two union territories under the government's direct control. India controls only the southern part of the Kashmir region, while Pakistan and China occupy the northwestern and northeastern parts, respectively.

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India-Pakistan 'Strict Observance' of Ceasefire Positive Step for Stability - White House

WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) - The decision by India and Pakistan to commit to strict observance of the ceasefire along the Line of Control in the Kashmir region is a positive step for stability in South Asia, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Thursday.

"The United States welcomes the joint statement between India and Pakistan that the two countries have agreed to maintain strict observance of a ceasefire along the line of control starting on February 25," Psaki said in a press briefing. "This is a positive step towards peace and stability in south Asia which is in our shared interest and we encourage both countries to keep building upon this progress."

Earlier in the day, the Indian Defense Ministry said India and Pakistan agreed to maintain "strict observance" of agreements and the ceasefire along the Line of Control in the Kashmir region and to address each other's concerns.

The defense ministers of both countries reviewed the situation in Kashmir and other regions.

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New York Leads 21 US States in Supreme Court Battle to Halt 'Ghost Gun' Instructions

WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) - A coalition of 21 US states urged the Supreme Court to reject a lawsuit that would potentially legalize the distribution of instructions to make so-called "ghost guns" - untraceable firearms made with 3D printers, New York Attorney General Letitia James said on Thursday.

In an amicus brief filed with the Supreme Court, the coalition urged the justices to uphold state laws banning publication of downloadable files with instructions for building firearms from 3D-printed parts, James said in a press release. The laws are being challenged in a lawsuit by the Texas-based firm Defense Distributed, which claims it has a constitutional right to publish the instructions.

"For years, we've been fighting Defense Distributed's illegal efforts to make dangerous assault weapons more easily accessible to anyone with an internet connection," James said. "Defense Distributed has repeatedly taken steps to make it easier for criminals and terrorists to get their hands on guns and for anyone to print unregistered, untraceable, and, in many cases, undetectable firearms."

For years, Defense Distributed has attempted to disseminate files on the internet that allow Americans to make guns, primarily from plastic, that are difficult to detect with metal detectors. The amicus brief asks the high court to uphold a right of individual states to block internet-based instructions for building ghost guns, even when the instructions are posted other states and therefore universally available.

The Second Amendment to the US Constitution guarantees the right of Americans to keep and bear arms.

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UN Chief Extends Mandate of Special Tribunal for Lebanon Until March 2023 - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, February 25 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has extended the mandate of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, investigating the 2005 attack in Beirut, which killed former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, until March 2023, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Thursday.

"The Secretary-General has extended the mandate of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon from March 1 2021 for a further period of two years, or until the completion of the cases before the Special Tribunal, if sooner, or the exhaustion of available funds, if sooner," Dujarric said in a statement.

The spokesman said within the next two years, the Hague-based tribunal is expected to draw down its activities as its judicial work is completed.

Earlier in the month, the President of the special tribunal in a letter to the UN chief had asked for a two-year extension after it became clear the tribunal's work could not be completed by the mandate's expiration after February 28, 2021.

Hariri was killed by a suicide truck bomb in Beirut on February 14, 2005. The UN Security Council established the Special Tribunal in 2007 to investigate the attack that, apart from Hariri, killed 22 and injured 226.

In August, the tribunal exonerated three main suspects: Hussein Hassan Oneissi, Hassan Habib Merhi, and Assad Hassan Sabra. Simultaneously, the tribunal declared Salim Jamil Ayyash, a Hezbollah member, guilty on all counts.

On December 11, Ayyash was sentenced in absentia to five concurrent life imprisonment terms. A month later, the defense filed notices of appeals, the proceedings of which are currently ongoing.

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US Stocks Plunge as Bond Yields Jump, Tech Stocks Lead Selloff With 3% Tumble

NEW YORK, February 25 (Sputnik) - Stocks on Wall Street plunged Thursday with technology index Nasdaq losing about 3 percent for its biggest one-day decline since September, as bond yields surged and players took profit on nearly four straight months of gains.

Nasdaq, which includes industry giants such as Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google, was down 3.1 percent at 13,189, after a record high of 14,173.45 struck earlier this month. The S&P 500, a barometer for the top 500 US stocks, was down 2.2 percent at 3,840. The Dow Jones Industrial Average, the broadest gauge of the New York Stock Exchange, fell 1.6 percent to 31,500. The plunge in US stocks coincided with the rise in the yield of the US 10-year Treasury note to highs seen in February 2020, before the onset of the coronavirus pandemic.

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Biden, Johnson Receive Letter With Request to Lift Sanctions Against Syria - Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS, February 25 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson received a letter with over 90 signatories urging them to lift sanctions imposed against Syria as such measures exacerbate the humanitarian situation in the country, Russian Permanent Representative Vassily Nebenzia to the United Nations told the Security Council on Thursday.

"We've spoken on several occasions about the relevant conclusions of the UN Special Rapporteur on the impact of sanctions on the enjoyment of human rights. On the basis of her conclusions at the end of January this year, President Biden and Prime Minister Johnson received a joint letter with more than 90 signatures with a request to lift sanctions against Syria," Nebenzia said.

According to the diplomat, the signatories included not only representatives of academia, journalists and humanitarian workers, but also former ambassadors to the Arab Republic from

the United Kingdom, Germany, France and Tunisia, as well as a current member of the UK House of Lords.

"This letter has a consensus that this collective punishment of civilians, including sanctions, is bringing Syria towards an unprecedented humanitarian catastrophe," Nebenzia said.

He added due to the impact of sanctions, Damascus cannot run its stock exchange, vital for the economy to function, buy building materials abroad and procure medicine and relevant equipment necessary in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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UNICEF, AstraZeneca Sign Deal to Provide COVID-19 Vaccines to 85 Countries - Statement

WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) - UNICEF and the British-Swedish AstraZeneca pharmaceutical corporation have signed an agreement to provide COVID-19 vaccines to 85 nations, the agency announced in a press release on Thursday.

"UNICEF and AstraZeneca this week signed a long-term agreement for the supply of COVID-19 Vaccine AstraZeneca on behalf of the COVAX Facility," the release said.

Through the agreement, UNICEF and its procurement partners including the Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO), will have access to up to 170 million doses of vaccines for around 85 countries, the UN agency said.

"The AstraZeneca/Oxford vaccine received WHO Emergency Use Listing (EUL) on 15 February. Deliveries of the vaccine are planned to begin in the first quarter of 2021," the release said.

On 11 February, UNICEF announced the signing of an agreement with Pfizer for the supply of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 Vaccine through 2021, following an agreement with the Serum Institute of India to access two vaccines through technology transfer from AstraZeneca which has been granted, the UN agency noted.

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US House Democrats Committed to Passing Minimum Wage Legislation Soon - Pelosi

WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) - The Democratic majority in the US House of Representatives is committed to quickly passing legislation to raise the minimum wage in the United States to \$15 an hour by 2025, Speaker Nancy Pelosi told reports on Thursday.

"We will pass a minimum wage bill," Pelosi said during a press conference on Capitol Hill.

However, Pelosi is under pressure from the Progressive wing of Democratic party that wants the provision to be included in the \$1.7 trillion COVID-19 economic stimulus package she will introduce next week.

Progressives are now threatening to withhold support if the measure does not include the minimum wage increase, according to media reports.

If the Democrats voluntarily drop the minimum wage provision from the final bill, Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has indicated she may withdraw her support for the proposal.

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US Senate Confirms Jennifer Granholm to Be Biden's Energy Secretary

WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) - The US Senate on Thursday confirmed Jennifer Granholm to be the next Energy Secretary.
The Senate confirmed Granholm's nomination with a 64-35 vote.

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UN Greatly Concerned by Situation in Armenia, Urges Parties to Restrain - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, February 25 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is concerned by the recent developments in Armenia and calls on all parties to show restraint and engage in dialogue to de-escalate tensions, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Thursday. Earlier in the day, the General Staff of the Armenian Armed Forces demanded the resignation of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. The prime minister declared it an attempted coup and dismissed the Chief of General Staff, Onik Gasparian, from his post.
"What we're seeing in Armenia is of great concern to us," Dujarric said. "It's very important that all parties remain calm. We urge restraint. We also encourage an inclusive dialogue to de-escalate tensions and address political differences, and that needs to be done with full respect for the Constitution and the democratic process."

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US House to Start Working on George Floyd Police Reform Bill Next Week - Speaker Pelosi

WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) - The Democratic majority in the House of Representatives plans to re-introduce the George Floyd Justice and Policing Bill next week and rapidly pass it, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi told a Capitol Hill press conference on Thursday. "We will have [the bill] on the floor next week," Pelosi said.
The proposed legislation, she added, is respectful of police who do their work honorably. The bill was first passed last year in the House after riots convulsed US cities when George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black man, was killed in a chokehold by a police officer after pleading that

he could not breathe. But the then-Republican majority in the Senate sat on the bill. The Democrats regained control of the Senate in January elections in Georgia. The speaker, yesterday, said the bill if passed would ban chokeholds, stop no-knock warrants, and combat racial profiling. The legislation is designed to address systemic racism and curb police brutality, she added.

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El Salvador Becomes First Malaria-Free State in Central America - Health Agency

WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) - El Salvador is the first nation in Central America to eliminate Malaria within its borders, the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) announced on Thursday.

"With the exception of one outbreak in 1996, El Salvador steadily reduced its malaria burden over the last three decades. Between 1990 and 2010, the number of malaria cases declined from more than 9000 to 26. The country has reported zero indigenous cases of the disease since 2017," PAHO said in a press release.

El Salvador is the third country in Latin America to have achieved malaria-free status in recent years, following Argentina in 2019 and Paraguay in 2018. Globally, a total of 38 countries and territories have reached this milestone, the release said.

El Salvador reported its last malaria-related death in 1984, the release added.

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UAE Supports Biden's Bet on Diplomacy in Dealing with Iran - Ex-Foreign Minister

WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) - The United Arab Emirates endorses US President Joe Biden's strategic emphasis on diplomacy in dealing with the Iranian nuclear problem as long as it addresses other issues such as Tehran's missile program and support to proxy groups, former Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash said on Thursday.

"Strategically, the Biden administration is doing the right thing in terms of prioritizing diplomacy," Gargash said during a virtual conference at the Brookings Institution. "Are we concerned about missiles, are we concerned about proxy politics? Yes, we are. We need this to be taken into account. So that is really our concern."

The UAE would support the reinstatement of the nuclear deal, ditched by Biden's predecessor Donald Trump, as it is with further negotiations on outstanding issues.

"We will be supportive of it. But what we want to really know is are other issues going to be addressed," Gargash said.

He urged the United States to consult with its allies in the Middle East and launch a comprehensive diplomatic process for a permanent solution rather than a fast one.

"It's important in my assessment to get the process going. The idea basically is not only to find a fast solution, the idea is to find a permanent solution. And to find a permanent solution, number 1, you need to prioritize diplomacy, number 2, you need to deescalate, number 3, you need also to listen to the concerns of your neighbors and your friends in the region, us and others," former minister said.

The process, Gargash added, should not only be about the stability of the region but prosperity. Gargash denounced as "a very dangerous talk" routine Israeli statements about the possibility of unilateral military action against Iran.

"I understand the concerns, but again from where we sit here in the Gulf and from the region that has been scarred by too many, too many conflicts other than diplomacy we just see no option, no option at all," he said.

According to media reports, US and Israel are reconvening a strategic working group to share intelligence and consult ahead anticipated first meaningful steps to revive the nuclear deal.

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Congressmen Urge Blinken to Pressure Saudis to Drop Charges Against US Rights Advocates

WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) - A group of congressmen on Thursday sent a letter to Secretary of State Antony Blinken urging him to pressure Saudi Arabia to drop charges and travel bans imposed on human right advocates who are US citizens and permanent residents. "We cannot tolerate Saudi Arabia's campaign against those who bravely speak out for human rights and basic freedoms, especially if those individuals are US citizens and lawful residents," Senators Tim Kaine, Mark Warner, and six others said in a letter.

Several US citizens are facing trials in Saudi Arabia on March 8 or are subject to travel bans to the country due to their advocacy of social reforms, the letter said.

US citizens Salah Al-Haidar and Bader Al-Ibrahim are facing trial while Walid Fitaihi and his seven family members, all US citizens, are subject to a travel ban, the letter said.

Of particular concern is the health condition of Abdulrahman Al-Sadhan, a US university graduate who has been detained for more than 1,000 days, the letter added.

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Nearly 12.5M in Syrians Lack Regular Access to Food - UN Under-Secretary-General

UNITED NATIONS, February 25 (Sputnik) - The number of people who are food-insecure in Syria has reached almost 12.5 million over the last year, representing 60 percent of that country's population, UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Mark Lowcock said on Thursday.

"Around 60 percent of the Syrian population, that's nearly 12.5 million people, do not now have regular access to enough safe and nutritious food. An additional 4.5 million people have fallen into this category over the last year," Lowcock told the UN Security Council.

Lawcock attributed the surge to multiple shocks that Syria's already fragile economy has experienced over the last 18 months. Among them are the depreciation of the Syrian Pound, which has inflated food prices by more than 200 percent, he said.

The increase in the cost of food has substantially dwindled the Syrians' purchasing power by some 20 percent, Lowcock said.

"Millions of Syrians are resorting to desperate measures to survive," he said.

In addition, more than half a million children under the age of five are diagnosed with stunting due to chronic malnutrition, Lowcock added.

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IMF Actively Assessing Risks, Benefits From Digital Currency Developments - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) is actively working with other multinational organizations to assess the potential benefits and risks from digital currencies, IMF spokesperson Gerry Rice told reporters on Thursday.

"IMF is very engaged on this issue and analysis, surveillance and capacity development, and actively collaborating with other international bodies," Rice said during a virtual press briefing. Rice explained that digital currencies continue to develop and pose risks and benefits for the global economy, which is why the IMF is following the situation very thoroughly, he said.

"Public and private digital currencies can reduce the cost of doing business, improve productivity and market integration. On the other hand, they can undermine funding, data privacy and cybersecurity," Rice said.

Speaking of future measures to contain the risks from digital currencies, Rice emphasized the necessity of forward looking, supervision and regulation.

"The microfinancial implications need to be managed, including to currency substitution, financial stability and capital account restrictions," Rice said.

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Argentina to Continue Talks With IMF on New Loan Package in Mid-March - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) - Argentine Economy Minister Martin Guzman is set to visit Washington in mid-March to continue talks with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) on a new loan package, IMF spokesperson Gerry Rice told reporters on Thursday.

"Minister Guzman and his team have indicated that they would be traveling to Washington in mid-March," Rice said during a press briefing.

The spokesperson pointed out that the IMF discussions with Argentina continue to be very active and constructive as the Argentine authorities work to lay out their economic plan that could be supportive by the IMF program.

Rice also said the IMF and Argentina have not yet established a specific date for the next formal staff mission to Buenos Aires but are expected to do so soon.

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US Q4 GDP up a Notch at 4.1%, 2020 Decline Stays at 3.5% - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) - The US gross domestic product growth for the fourth quarter of 2020 showed a slightly higher reading of 4.1 percent on its second reading, though the economic decline for 2020 itself was unchanged, the Commerce Department said on Thursday.

"Real gross domestic product (GDP) increased at an annual rate of 4.1 percent in the fourth quarter of 2020, according to the 'second' estimate released by the Bureau of Economic Analysis," the department said in a statement. "The GDP estimate released today is based on more complete source data than were available for the 'advance' estimate issued last month." In the so-called advance, or first, reading of fourth quarter GDP released on January 28, growth was estimated at 4.0 percent.

While the quarterly revision to the GDP was positive, it was still a sliver of the record expansion of 33.1 percent seen in the third quarter. The third quarter growth was extraordinarily large as the economy rebounded from a spate of lockdowns, social restrictions and job losses in the second quarter associated with the coronavirus pandemic.

Notwithstanding the quarterly growth, the GDP estimate for all of 2020 remained at a negative 3.5 percent, versus the 2.2 percent growth registered in 2019.

The annual decline in GDP came after a year of momentous economic disruptions and job losses in the United States. The US economy lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April 2020, at the height of business lockdowns and social restrictions forced by the COVID-19. At least 10 million of those jobs have not returned, data shows.

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Biden Approves Oklahoma Disaster Declaration - Federal Emergency Management Agency

WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has declared a major disaster in the US state of Oklahoma following a wave of winter storms there from February 8 to February 20, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) said in a press release on Thursday. "Today, President Joseph Biden declared that a major disaster exists in the State of Oklahoma and ordered federal assistance to supplement state, tribal, and local recovery efforts in the areas affected by severe winter storms from February 8 to February 20, 2021," the release said.

FEMA explained the president's action makes federal funding available to affected individuals in the 16 counties of Canadian, Carter, Cherokee, Comanche, Cotton, Hughes, Jefferson, Le Flore, McIntosh, Oklahoma, Okmulgee, Osage, Pittsburg, Stephens, Tulsa and Wagoner.

"Assistance can include grants for temporary housing and home repairs, low-cost loans to cover uninsured property losses, and other programs to help individuals and business owners recover from the effects of the disaster," the release said.

Federal funding is also available to state and eligible local governments and certain private nonprofit organizations on a cost-sharing basis for emergency protective measures and hazard mitigation measures statewide, the release added.

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UN Humanitarian Coordinator Urges Donors to Fund \$1.9Bln for Sudan Operations - OCHA

UNITED NATIONS, February 25 (Sputnik) - UN Acting Humanitarian Coordinator in Sudan Axel Bisschop urged donors to swiftly provide contributions to Sudan's Humanitarian Response Plan to reach \$1.9 billion it is seeking for 2021, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said in a statement on Thursday.

"The operational plan for West Darfur is part of Sudan's US\$1.9 billion Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) to provide assistance to 8.9 million vulnerable people," the statement said. "The Humanitarian Coordinator urged donors to provide early and flexible disbursement contributions for the 2021 HRP."

OCHA said the humanitarian coordinator visited West Darfur on February 17-18, where he met representatives of 170,000 people displaced by communal conflict in the town of Ag Geneina. Bisschop observed people living in overcrowded public buildings, including schools, which has disrupted learning for 58,000 children, lacking adequate sanitation and basic services.

"Security must be provided, damaged shelter must be repaired, basic services need to be restored and solutions found to enable a return to normality," Bisschop said.

On January 16-18, at least 235 people were killed and more injured in two separate incidents of inter-communal clashes in West and South Darfur. The hostilities erupted three weeks after a joint United Nations-African Union peacekeeping mission pulled out from the region, handing responsibility to the government in Khartoum.

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Coronavirus Pandemic Set to Fuel Islamic State Recruitment Efforts - Jordan King Abdullah

WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) - The coronavirus pandemic's consequences such as numerous crises and inequalities will lead to a boost in efforts of the Islamic State terror group

(banned in Russia) to recruit fighters, Jordan's King Abdullah II ibn Al Hussein said on Thursday.

"Directing our attention and resources to countering the pandemic has taken away from our focus on fighting terrorism and extremism," he said. "Although the battle may be won, the war is not yet over. Rising inequalities and emerging crises caused by the pandemic will fuel the recruitment efforts of ISIS [Islamic State], Boko Haram, Al Shabab and Al Qaeda."

On Wednesday, Iraqi President Barham Salih said his country is seeing revival of Islamic State activities near Mosul, in Anbar province and sometimes in Kirkuk.

Iraq declared victory over the Islamic State in late 2017, but the army, with the support of the US-led coalition and militia units, still conducts military operations against terrorists and sleeper cells that are active.

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Trump's Tax Records in Hands of Manhattan District Attorney - CNN

WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) - The District Attorney in Manhattan has gained control of former President Donald Trump's tax records following a US Supreme Court decision on Monday rejecting his efforts to keep them private, CNN reported on Thursday, citing an anonymous source.

Prosecutors gained control of the records late on Monday, only hours after the Supreme Court's decision, the report said. The papers contain millions of pages of documents including Trump's tax returns from January 2011 to August 2019, with financial statements, engagement agreements, documents on how the returns were prepared and other materials.

Manhattan prosecutors took the documents from Trump's accounting company Mazars USA, but they will not be released to the public as they are subject to grand jury secrecy rules, the report said.

New York District Attorney Cy Vance, the son of late Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, is investigating whether Trump and the Trump Organization engaged in tax fraud, insurance fraud and other schemes to defraud, the report said.

The Manhattan District Attorney is also investigating whether Trump provided false information to financial institutions or banks about the value of some of his buildings and assets, the report added.

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Yellen Calls on G20 Colleagues to 'Go Big' With Economic Stimulus - Treasury

WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) - US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen on Thursday called on her G20 counterparts to "go big" with the economic stimulus in response to the global economic crisis and step up their support for global coronavirus vaccination programs.

"I urge the G20 countries to continue to take significant fiscal and financial policy actions and avoid withdrawing support too early. If there was ever a time to go big, this is the moment," Yellen wrote in a letter to G20 finance officials during a virtual meeting.

Yellen expressed the United States' support for multilateral vaccine programs such as the Access to COVID-19 Tools Accelerator initiative and its COVAX Facility as well as urged increasing their support for such initiatives.

All countries should take urgent steps to use benefits of international trade and investment in current situation, Yellen said, adding that such cooperative efforts will be greater than the sum of each nation's individual responses.

However, Yellen drove home the message that containing the coronavirus is a priority for a strong economic recovery.

"Containing the pandemic across the globe is paramount to a robust economic recovery," she said.

Yellen also urged the G20 countries to continue with the significant fiscal and financial policy actions and warned against too early withdrawal of such support.

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Americans' Confidence in US Economy Inches Upward But Remains Negative – Poll

WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) – Pessimism over US economic conditions eased slightly in February while remaining in negative territory, Gallup's Economic Confidence Index showed on Thursday.

"An eight-point increase to -13 [minus 13] this month puts the index at its best reading since November," Gallup said in a press release.

The current -13 reading is up from -21 in January and is better than the -33 low from the spring of 2020. The lowest point, -72, was during the Great Recession in October 2008, Gallup said.

The index is based on polls asking Americans to rate economic conditions as excellent, good, only fair, poor and also whether the economy is getting better or worse, the release said.

The combined responses are used to compile the index, with a theoretical range of plus 100 if everyone says the economy is excellent or good and getting better, to minus 100 if everyone says the economy is poor and getting worse, according to Gallup.

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US Jobless Claims Down 13% After Week of Snowstorms - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) - US weekly jobless claims fell 13 percent last week to the lowest in three months, Labor Department data showed on Thursday, as snowstorms in the central and southern United States, particularly Texas, knocked out power and disrupted regular activity.

"In the week ending February 20, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 730,000, a decrease of 111,000 from the previous week's revised level. The previous week's level was revised down by 20,000 from 861,000 to 841,000," the department said in a news release.

The 13 percent drop brought weekly jobless claims to their lowest level since late November. Storms and freezing temperatures in Texas and other states in the lower half of America suffered widespread power outages and disruptions last week. Media reports said officials were also investigating fraud filings in at least one state, Ohio, that could have resulted in adjustments.

Economists surveyed by US media had expected as many as 825,000 filings for last week. Some noted that claims numbers had been volatile the past two weeks, making it harder to get a read of unemployment trends amid the protracted COVID-19 crisis.

"Claims have sort of hit a floor and we're seeing this relatively high figure week in, week out," Justin Low, a commentator at ForexLive, said.

The United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April, at the height of business lockdowns forced by the coronavirus. At least 10 million of those jobs have not returned, data shows.

The US economy itself shrank 3.5 percent in 2020, after a 2.2 percent growth in 2019. Federal Reserve Chairman Jay Powell told a Senate banking committee this week that the US economic outlook remained highly uncertain, with recovery appearing uneven and far from complete, despite progress in COVID-19 vaccinations. But Powell also said that notwithstanding the broader outlook, he expected gross domestic product growth to return to pre-pandemic levels by the first half of this year.

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UN Rights Chief Bachelet Calls on Belarus to Release All Peaceful Protesters - Statement

UNITED NATIONS, February 25 (Sputnik) - UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet called on Belarus on Thursday to release all peaceful protesters and conduct investigations into all allegations of serious human rights violations in the context of the 2020 presidential election.

"All those who have been detained for peacefully exercising their rights should be released," Bachelet said in a statement. "Thorough, effective, credible and transparent investigations should be conducted into all allegations of serious human rights violations, with perpetrators brought to justice."

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US Designates Former Slovak Prosecutor For Corruption - Blinken

WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) - The US government is designating former prosecutor general Dobroslav Trnka of the Slovak Republic along with his son over their involvement in significant corruption, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday.

"Today, I am announcing the public designation of former Prosecutor General Dobroslav Trnka of the Slovak Republic due to his involvement in significant corruption," Blinken said in a statement. "In his official capacity as the prosecutor general of Slovakia, Trnka was involved in corrupt acts that undermined rule of law and the Slovak public's faith in their government's democratic institutions, officials, and public processes."

The US government is also designating Trnka's son, Jakub Trnka, rendering both of them ineligible for entry into the United States, Blinken said.

"This designation reaffirms US commitment to combating corruption in Slovakia. The United States continues to stand with the people of Slovakia in their fight against corruption. The department will continue to use these authorities to promote accountability for corrupt actors in this region and globally," Blinken said.

The designation does not seek to prejudge or influence ongoing or future Slovak legal proceedings involving Trnka, Blinken added.

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Yellen Calls on G20 Colleagues to 'Go Big' With Economic Stimulus - Treasury

WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) – US Treasury Secretary on Thursday called on her G20 counterparts to “go big” with economic stimulus in response to the global economic crisis and step up their support for global COVID-19 vaccination programs.

"I urge G20 countries to continue to take significant fiscal and financial policy actions and avoid withdrawing support too early. If there was ever a time to go big, this is the moment," Yellen said in a letter to G20 colleagues.

Yellen expressed US support for multilateral vaccine programs such as the Access to COVID-19 Tools Accelerator initiative and its COVAX Facility and urged her colleagues to "increase their support" for such initiatives.

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Blinken to Make 'Virtual Trip' to Mexico, Canada on Friday - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will make his first "virtual" foreign visits to Mexico and Canada on Friday, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken will embark tomorrow on his first 'virtual trip,' visiting Mexico and Canada on February 26. Secretary Blinken's virtual travel prioritizes the health and safety of everyone involved, while demonstrating the significance of our partnerships with our neighbors and some of our closest partners," Price said in a statement.

During his Mexico "visit," Blinken will hold separate meetings with Foreign Affairs Secretary Marcelo Ebrad and Economy Secretary Tatiana Clouthier to discuss a range of issues including bilateral trade, shared security challenges, migration and climate change, Price said.

"During a visit to the Paso Del Norte port of entry — which links El Paso, Texas, and Ciudad Juarez, Mexico — Secretary Blinken and Foreign Secretary Ebrard will discuss cooperation

between Mexico and the United States to manage migration flows and travel across the U.S.-Mexico border," he added.

Later in the day, Blinken will travel "virtually" to Canada for follow-up talks on President Joe Biden's first virtual bilateral meeting earlier this week with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, Price said.

Blinken's talks with Trudeau, Foreign Minister Marc Garneau and other cabinet members will address topics including the COVID-19 pandemic and economic recovery, as well as "taking bold action on climate change, defending human rights in the Western Hemisphere and around the world, and bolstering our shared defense and security," Price said.

The top US diplomat will also meet with local students in both countries to discuss "opportunities and policy options" for the two countries, Price said.

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RPT - US Federal Reserve Payment System Restored After Disruption - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) - The US Federal Reserve payment system has been restored following a temporary disruption to services, Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond spokesman Jim Strader told Sputnik.

"Services are restored," Strader said after the Fed's banking system, which allows US financial institutions to send money back and forth electronically, was downed for a few hours on Wednesday.

Strader said a Federal Reserve operational error had caused the disruption of service in several business lines.

All Federal Reserve Financial Services customers have been notified about the status of operations, he added.

On its services website, the Federal Reserve said the Fedwire Funds Service, Fedwire Securities Service and National Settlement Service had resumed normal operations, although there were some "ongoing technical issues."

"Balances in AMI are incomplete. We are working to resolve the issue as quickly as possible," it added.

The Federal Reserve sent an alert to such customers at 12:43 p.m. ET of "a possible issue or disruption to multiple services." In a follow-up alert, it said Fed staff became aware of "a disruption for all services" beginning around 11:15 a.m.

In addition to setting monetary policy, one of the Federal Reserve's lesser-known roles includes acting as a bank for the nation's banks, as well as for the US Treasury Department. It provides services including collecting checks and electronically transferring funds, and by selling and redeeming Treasury bills.